MARITAL LIFE: A CHALLENGE FOR PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION BY WOMEN IN PAKISTAN

[*]Malik Mamoon Munir
[**]Bakhtawar Munir
[***]Sana Arz Bhutto

Abstract

Misapprehensions of culture and religion are used for the early marriages of women in Pakistan, which generates few significant challenges for women to pursue their higher education. The present study identifies such challenges for married women in higher education. These challenges are relevant to women's post-marriage lifespan in rural Pakistan. Building upon Fredrickson's (2001) and Hobfoll's (2001) theories focused on post marriages issues, the study has developed open-ended questions for collecting in-depth information. Therefore, 43 in-depth interviews with married women were conducted and through qualitative data analysis using NVIVO software, the study has highlighted that early marriages of girls have become a cultural norm, and education priorities of the girls are insignificant for parents to decide the marriage date. Married women pursuing education at marriage do not get any support from husbands and in-laws as the patriarchal norms prohibit women from stepping out from home. In these circumstances, women may get subject to the victim of many unlawful practices, including intimate partner violence (IPV). Thus, the present study findings imply that married women's participation in higher education is negligible due to weak legislation on women's rights and strong illegitimate tribal practices.

Keywords: Married women, higher education, early marriage, intimate partner violence, marital life, Pakistan

Introduction

The role of women as community volunteers, health professionals, teachers, scientists and more during the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a reminder to the world of their vital contributions to societal health and well-being. Globally, as the professional workforce in the health sector, the woman's presence is 70% as community health workers, midwives, and nurses. In addition, many women work as service workers in various academic and government institutions. Despite these figures, the role of women is not taken into account when making decisions for women protection rights. Moreover, women generally hold fewer executive positions and are paid considerably less than their male counterparts. Even all pandemic personal protective equipment (PPE) is usually sized and designed for

This work is Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License.
[*] Malik Mamoon Munir, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan
[**] Bakhtawar Munir, MS in English Literature, Comsats University, Islamabad, Pakistan
[***] Sana Arz Bhutto, Ph.D., Director of the Business School, Sindh Institute of Management and Technology, Karachi, Pakistan

men, increasing the risk of women being exposed to male dominance in decision-making. Compounding on women's difficulties, the significant role of women in higher education is the key to reducing the gap in occupational choices dominated by men. However, for centuries, women, particularly married women, have struggled to access higher education. Even though in the 21st century, a major portion of college graduates are women, the struggle to pursue higher education after getting married is not over. Supporting married women in higher education to reduce the gender pay gap and gendered decision making is still a challenge in developing countries like Pakistan.

Pakistan is a country where misapprehensions of culture and religion are used for the early marriages of girls.[1] Watta Satta or exchange marriages are quite common, and sometimes young marriages also settle tribal disputes, blood money, and property feuds.[2] According to Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS), during the year 2020-21 in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, 3.3 percent of girls' marriages happen under 15 years of age, and 18.3 percent of girls' marriages happen under 18 years of age.[3] Due to various socio-economic reasons, these early marriages of the country become a challenge for the girls to continue or pursue their higher education.[4] Moreover, in tribal districts of Pakistan, where going to school, college, or university by a girl or woman is considered unlawful, such female college students completely lose their rights to study after their marriage.[5] Tribal lords, religious leaders, and state administrators completely support this ideology.[6] In one of the northern districts of Pakistan, female college students are sold off for Pakistani rupees 3.0 million, and no consideration is given to their educational rights.[7]

For this reason, it's imperative to investigate the key causes impacting married women decision making and limiting them not to pursue their higher education in Pakistan. The study is important to conduct at this cross-sectional time frame, particularly when Pakistan faces serious economic and societal challenges and the COVID-19 pandemic has also shown its impacts on human life. This study may highlight the gender-based disparities and indicate male community mindset towards females for the level of facilitation male gives to females for the basic needs of life.

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[1] Atkins, D. C., & Kessel, D. E. (2008). Religiousness and infidelity: Attendance, but not faith and prayer, predict marital fidelity. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 407-418.

[2] Khan, N. A. (2021). Why I wrote Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 453-460.

[2] Shaheed, F. (2010). Contested identities: Gendered politics, gendered religion in Pakistan. *Third World Quarterly*, 31, 851-867.

3 Khan, S. (2021). Mental Health Needs of Working Women: Pakistan's Case. Journal for Business Education and Management, 1(02), 81–95. https://doi.org/10.56596/jbem.v1i02.24.

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[5] Pell, Shaukat, S., & William, A. (2015). Personal and Social Problems Faced by Women in Higher Education. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2).

[6] Mishra, L. (2021). Effects of Violence against Women on Higher Education in Mizoram, India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(1), 465-472.

[7] Munir, M.M., Munir, M. H., & Rubaca, U. (2021). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.

Problem Statement

The present study intends to identify that women marriages are being conducted without women consent and it is a regular feature in Pakistani culture. Hence, It raises the post-marriage problems for women, and their higher education participation becomes negligible. In their early married life, married women undergo psychological and health challenges, which creates more frustration within the family. The married women pursuing education at the time of marriage leave their education as family, and home becomes their priority. In the absence of husband support, educated girls who wish to continue their education after marriage faces serious marital life challenges.

Research Questions

Based on the problem gap identified, the present study has targeted to address three (03) research questions;

01. What is the importance of women's higher education in Pakistan?
02. Do the women in Pakistan get the opportunity for higher studies after marriage.
03. What challenges married women to face in pursuing their higher education in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Higher education is the key to a sustainable society and contributes substantially to the country's economic and social sector.[8] However, developing countries like Pakistan face the merit-based open civil society challenge due to the lack of female empowerment and female participation in higher education due to their marriage.[9] According to the World Bank collection of development indicators, 54 percent country's population comprises females. Due to the reason that early marriage is a social obligation in Pakistan, 64 percent of the female population in the country are married, according to the PDHS survey. Less than 47 percent of this female population is literate, less than 21 percent are pursuing their higher education, and less than 8 percent are pursuing their higher education after getting married, according to Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER). This GER for married women in higher education in neighbouring countries of Pakistan is much higher. For instance, it is 24 percent in India, and in Sri Lanka, it is 21 percent.[10]

Women, particularly young women pursuing their education at marriage, undergo various health complications due to the unexpected family life burden and lack of support for

[8] Gantaloo, U.S. (2016). Study of Women Role in Higher Education and Research Development of Baramati Taluka Dis Pune. *International Education & Research Journal*, 2(12), 20-21.
[9] Maqsood, F., Maqsood, S., & Raza, H. (2012). Getting Higher Education: Is it Really Challenge for Females in Pakistan. *Academic Research Journal*, 2(3).
[10] Khan, N. A. (2021). Why I wrote Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 453-460.

completing their remaining education.[11] Hormonal disorders, anaemia, and vaginal fistula are some common health problems.[12] The country government cannot offer any protection to married women who want to pursue their education due to a poor legislative system.[13] The country only allocates 2.7 percent of its annual budget to education, whereas UNESCO has recommended at least 4 percent of budget allocation for all developing countries.[14] The right of education for married women is generally ignored in Pakistan because it is considered that married women should only focus on home chores and give birth to the children of their men.[15] For this reason, married women are also subject to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV).[16]

The various status of married women because of gender interconnections with different societal classes such as regions, styles, and urban/rural divide offers married women a systematic subordination role at large.[17] The distribution of labour based on gender has distinguished the role of women and men as reproduction and production artificial divide.[18] Married women are placed in the reproductive role as wives or mothers in their home, whereas men are placed in productive roles as breadwinners in their public arena.[19] This ideology has caused low interest in women development by the state as well as their respective families.[20] The married women have to face certain home restrictions, negative cultural biases and honour linked with her 'Purdah' (veiled), and a higher education facility becomes just a dream.[21] Intra household bias, financial dependency on men, and limitations on mobility stop the majority of educated, married women from pursuing their higher education.[22]

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[13] Shaheed, F. (2010). Contested identities: Gendered politics, gendered religion in Pakistan. *Third World Quarterly*, 31, 851-867.

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[14] Fair, C. (2011). Pakistan in 2010: Flooding, governmental inefficiency, and continued insurgency. *Asian Survey*, 51(1), 97-110.

[15] Mukhtar, Rashid, K., & Sajid (2012). Education in Pakistan: Problems and their Solutions. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 2(11).

[16] Mishra, L. (2021). Effects of Violence against Women on Higher Education in Mizoram, India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(1), 465-472.

[17] Bajwa, J., & Meerali, N. (2020). South Asian Albertan Men's Understandings of Spousal Violence. *Violence Against Women*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220945031.

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[20] Gurudutta-japee (2019). Higher Education and Women in India, See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337593079.

[21] Khalil, N. A. (2010). Honor killing in Pakistan: The case of five women buried alive. Retrieved from http://www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/AkbarHonorKillinginPakistan.pdf.

[22] Khan, N. A. (2021). Why I wrote Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 453-460.

Methodology

The present study has adopted a qualitative approach and used thematic analysis to find the key challenges of married women in higher education.[23] The interview technique was used for information collection comprising of open-ended interview questions.[24] Seventy percent of the country's population resides in the rural outskirts of the country, where the life of a common person is generally compromised with basic needs.[25] For this reason, two provinces (Kyber Pakthunkhwa and Punjab) of Pakistan were targeted for information collection. It is because these provinces have a diverse culture and rigid societal norms. The present study has approached 79 married women using a maximum variation sampling technique in both regions. However, a sample of 27 married women from Punjab province and 16 married women from Kyber Pakhtunkhwa province provided useful feedback in the study (total 43 respondents) with a decline rate of 46 percent. The major reasons for the decline were hesitation to talk to any outside person and discuss their problems, restrictions from the husband not to speak with external people, fears of getting subject to IPV, and time limitations due to household responsibilities.

Community health workers (CHWs) plays a vital role in offering guidance regarding the basic health care facilities to married women in rural areas of Pakistan.[26] Hence, CHWs were approached through district health offices (DHOs) in both provinces to identify married women for interviews. In Pakistan, due to various restrictions on married women to establish contact with outside people, CHWs offered the bridge to contact with such married women. One female researcher was recruited from the university in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa and given the necessary training to conduct the interviews due to social norms and the convenience of the respondents. CHWs guided the interviewer regarding the suitable time for conducting interviews and supported obtaining their informed consent for voluntary participation. The present study has conducted 103 interviews at the participants' respective houses, whereas 80 interviews were conducted at the basic health facilities as per the participants' convenience. COVID-19 precautionary measures were also ensured during the interviews. The interviews lasted for 30 to 40 minutes each, and information was audio recorded for coding purposes. The interviews of 43 respondents were completed in 03 months (Jan to Mar 2022) of time. Following five (05) open-ended questions were asked from the married women in their native language (Urdu) for respondents' convenience and understanding. These questions were developed with the thorough consensus of subject matter experts (including academicians).

- Would you please explain whether your marriage was conducted with your permission and agreement?

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[24] Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
[25] Munir, M.M., Munir, M. H., & Rubaca, U. (2021). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.
[26] Munir, M.M., Munir, M. H., & Rubaca, U. (2021). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.

- Whether you were pursuing any education at the time of your marriage or what was your last qualification.
- Are you happy with your married life, and your husband and other family members are supportive?
- Do you want to pursue your further higher education or continue pursuing your further education after marriage?
- What challenges or restrictions do you face to pursue your higher education after marriage?

The present study has used NVIVO-10 software for data analysis.[27] For this reason, the recorded interviews were transcribed into the software and nodes were created through careful analysis of data.[28] Data were then coded into various nodes, which generated multiple themes.[29] To achieve data coding accuracy for generating themes, the researcher and interview assistant (female researcher) coded the data independently, then checked reliability between the two coder.[30] Moreover, the coders' discussion supported in removing the disagreements of data ratings and consensus was achieved. This scientific process has helped in reaching the correlation coefficients of 0.95 and enhanced reliability. The next section descriptively describes the key themes generated from the respondent's information.

Findings

The present study respondents had diverse demographics concerning their age, duration of the marriage, level of education, monthly household income, and the number of children (See Table 1). The majority of the respondents were educated enough to understand the present research purpose and thus, participated voluntarily to provide information.

[27] Neece, C., Mclntyre, L.L., & Fenning, R. (2020). Examining the impact of COVID-19 in ethnically diverse families with young children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disability research,* 64(10), 739-749.
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[29] Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2008). Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. *Sage Publications,* Inc., Los Angeles.
[30] Neece, C., Mclntyre, L.L., & Fenning, R. (2020). Examining the impact of COVID-19 in ethnically diverse families with young children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disability research,* 64(10), 739-749.

Table – 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of In-depth Interviews (N=43)

Participants			
Characteristics		**n**	**%**
Province			
Punjab		27	62.79
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa		16	37.21
Family Composition			
Joint Family System		36	83.72
Living with Husband		07	16.28
Age			
Less than 20 years		07	16.28
21 to 30 years		25	58.14
More than 30 years		11	25.58
Length of Marriage			
Less than 01 year		05	11.63
01 to 05 Years		16	37.21
More than 05 years		22	51.16
Family Monthly Income (PKR)*			
Less than 20,000		11	25.58
20,000 to 40,000		20	46.51
More than 40,000		12	27.91
Education			
Upto 12 Years of Schooling		09	20.93
Undergraduate Degree Holders		32	74.42
Postgraduate Degree Holders		02	4.65
Number of Children			
0 to 2 Children		16	37.21
3 to 4 Children		23	53.49
More than 4 Children		04	9.30

* 01 USD = 225 PKR

Conduct of Women Marriages without their Consent

Out of five (05) young women, two (02) are married in Pakistan before 18 years of age.[31] According to the demographic and health survey (DHS) 2020 of women in Pakistan, 35 percent of women married without permission in Punjab, whereas this percentage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is 46 percent. Families' major reasons for arranging marriages of young women without their consent are due to family culture and their norms. One administrative issue highlighted during the interviews was that in most cases, parents do not register their daughter births, which affects girls in attaining their early school. It becomes difficult to prove their legal age at the time of marriage. Nikah Khawan or Qazi (government official authorized for contracting marriage) may not verify whether a marriage is being conducted under any pressure on a young girl and without her consent. Although the laws in Pakistan allow punishments and fines in such cases, they are not enforced in a true sense. The decision of such forced marriages stays with father, brothers, or grandparents. A study in Punjab revealed that only 4.8 percent of the women in Punjab could propose a suitable life partner.[32] However, in such cases, selecting a husband by the woman is considered 'shameful', and she is that 'good' girls should leave this decision of marriage to their parents.

The present study findings also revealed that women's consent is not considered important for deciding their marriage in Pakistan. Thirty six respondents (out of 43) reported that their families took their marriage decision, and their consent was not taken. One respondent of 25 years of age from Punjab province said;

> My grandparents fixed my marriage with my cousin when I was born. He was 09 years older than me. I was living in a joint family system. At the age of 19 years, my cousin was 28 years old, and he was running a local grocery shop. I was studying in my college, and my parents arranged my marriage without asking me what I wanted in my life."

Another respondent from Kyber Pakhtunkhwa narrated "I am living at a place where women are not considered humans rather a slave. My parents told me that I need to be submissive to all men, whether my father, brother or husband. Education facility is considered a blessing in such circumstances where women's core task is only considered home management and are not allowed to go outside. No one asked me when, where and with whom I wanted to marry. One day, my parents told me that get ready as you are getting married next week when I was 17 years old."

Due to dominant male society, men are generally asked for their consent while choosing their life partner. Hence, post-marriage decision making rests with husbands, and wives have only to share the home responsibilities with the in-laws.

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[31] Critelli, F. M. (2010). Women's rights Human rights: Pakistani women against gender violence. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 37(2), 135-160.

[32] Munir, M.M., Munir, M. H., & Rubaca, U. (2021). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.

Marriage of a Woman supersedes her Educational Requirements

In Pakistan, in the past three (03) consecutive years, the top three positions in matric (secondary school level) exams have been achieved by girls.[33] Every year, these girls get appreciation from teachers, government, and society, but they end up going to their 'Susral' (Husband's home), and gender biasness prevents them from pursuing their education.[34] The education system which tells these girls that the "sky is the limit" ends up in "Home is the limit".[35] Ironically, in Pakistan, the societal norms compel the families to decide the girls' marriage as early as possible regardless of their age and educational requirements.[36] The success of the parents in the country are attached to the timely marriages of their daughters. For this reason, girls do not get the chance to complete their education as it becomes a challenge for them to attain husband support after marriage.

Despite being a majority of the population, women in Pakistan only hold 28 percent of the labour force. The present study findings revealed that 41 percent (N=43) of the respondents attended their college education when they got married. Only 7 percent were allowed to complete their college education without family support after marriage. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents were pursuing their post-graduate degrees. However, only 11 percent of these were allowed to complete their education. Eighteen percent of the total respondents had completed their college education at the time of marriage. The remaining 3 percent had no interest in further advancing their higher education. One of the respondents revealed that "I had a gold medal in my college, and I had to complete my higher studies before getting married. However, when I was halfway through my undergraduate degree, I was told that my marriage had been decided with my cousin working abroad. He will support me in completing my education. I resisted this marriage proposal and requested my family to allow me to complete the degree first. However, everyone at home tried to counsel me that everything would be fine and I would fulfil my dreams. But since after marriage and getting pregnant, I could not manage to leave home for my education."

Another respondent of age 29 years with two kids, living at Kyber Pakhtunkhwa province revealed that "I was a scholarship winner for my medical degree. I was in the fourth year of my medical degree when my parents accepted my marriage proposal. With the strong financial status of my husband, I insisted on getting married before completing my degree. After marriage, my husband felt that my education was adversely affecting our marriage life. So I was forced to forego my education to save my relationship. Since then, my career has been on hold, and my only role is now a housewife and mother of 2 kids."

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[33] Dawn News. (2020, April 04). COVID-19 was already wreaking havoc on our mental health, then came the job losses. https://www.dawn.com/news/1545799.
[34] Bajwa, J., & Meerali, N. (2020). South Asian Albertan Men's Understandings of Spousal Violence. *Violence Against Women*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220945031.
[35] Gurudutta-japee (2019). Higher Education and Women in India, See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337593079.
[36] Nagaraja, K. (2018). Empowerment of Women Through Higher Education. *International Journal of Current Research*, 10(2), 66113-66115.

Although few women return to their education after marriage if they are lucky enough to get their partner support, a few women also get such opportunities when their children are at the age of maturity. However, the decision of marriages for women rests with their families in Pakistan, and the preference is always given to fulfil this responsibility for women education and their goals.

Husbands' Distressing Attitude and Challenges of Married Life

In Pakistan, every year, more than 2,000 girls and women are murdered in the name of "honour killings", and reportedly 92 percent of the women in Pakistan faces domestic violence.[37] Women, especially after their marriage, struggle for respect, recognition, and basic rights from husbands. Although women empowerment is the priority for charitable organizations and NGOs, the government still challenges defining it through country laws.[38] Hence, men take advantage of the women living in rural outskirts and practice intimate partner violence (IPV) as their right.[39] Ironically, women speaking regarding sexual or physical abuse they receive from their husbands are seen as they have lost their family's dignity.[40] In Pakistan, husbands only get the right of divorce in the marriage agreement and exercise this right as a threat to women who speak against their unlawful demand.[41]

Due to lack of inter-spousal communication, married women have less decision-making power, lack of marital life satisfaction, restrictions of husbands, distress attitude from in-laws, and IPV.[42] Since the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the job market, the stress level of husbands has increased, eventually amplifying the IPV rate in Pakistan.[43] Even achieving the desired fertility rate or pregnancy is controlled by a woman' mother-in-law or her husband. Seventy percent of brown women married life consists of bargaining with their spouses.[44]

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[37] Munir, M.M., Munir, M. H., & Rubaca, U. (2021). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.

[38] Manzoor, A. (2011). Sexual Harassment: University of Peshawar suspends lecturer. The Express Tribune. May 18. Accessed August 29, 2021. https://tribune.com.pk/story/170748/sexual-harassment-university-of-peshawarsuspends-lecturer/.

39 Akhter, F., & Iqbal, S. (2021). Student's Performance And Academic Stress: A Study Of Higher Education Institution Of Pakistan. Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 60(1), 63–79. https://doi.org/10.46568/jssh.v60i1.483.

40 Naz, R. (2011). Superstitious beliefs among Pakhtun women in Pakistan. Retrieved from http://www.articlesbase.com/college-and-university-articles/superstitiousbeliefs-among-pakhtun-women-in-pakistan-4314002.html.

41 Raza, A., & Murad, H. S. (2010). Gender gap in Pakistan: A socio-demographic analysis. International Journal of Social Economics, 37, 541-557.

42 Casey, E., Carlson, J., Two Bulls, S., & Yager, A. (2018). Gender transformative approaches to engaging men in gender-based violence prevention: A review and conceptual model. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 19, 231–246.

[43] Nimble, O.J., & Chinnasamy, A. V. (2020). Financial Distress and Healthcare: A Study of Migrant Dalit Women Domestic Helpers in Bangalore, India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(5), 32-45.

[44] Parker, P. (2015). The Historical Role of Women in Higher Education. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research* (Spring 2015), 5(1), 3-14.

The present study also revealed that 93 percent of the respondents supported the above findings and mentioned the married life challenges and inadequate support from their husbands. Six percent of women hesitated to share their complete views on the interview question whereas 3 percent of women mentioned that they received support from their husbands and families in achieving their life goals. One respondent from Punjab province narrated that "I have only received a lack in patience, tolerance, trust, or whole level of understanding after my marriage. My husband is working in a cotton factory as a shift supervisor, and I thought that I would receive support from him to spend a healthy life. However, due to the large involvement of my mother-in-law in day to day affairs and my husband non-cooperative attitude has taken all my identity as a noblewomen at home."

Moreover, another respondent with post-graduate education and three kids revealed that "I can only say I am waiting for the day when my life ends. I expected so much and received nothing. Dream of a loving husband, a happy life, and a successful career ended the day I married. Besides attending college in pregnancy, I had to complete all home tasks efficiently as I was allowed to complete my education so that my home responsibilities would not suffer. My husband is a businessman, and he foresees his relationships in profit and loss perspective only, and he believes me as a loss for him."

Marital Life Pressure generates Demotivation to pursue Higher Education

Every civilization and religion recognize education and its importance. It is also known that "educating a woman is the educating the whole family". However, this is not the case with the women living in rural areas of Pakistan. Although education offers women to practice better care for children and contribute to the financial management of their home in hard times.[45] But this concept is superseded by such societal practices, which prevents married women from going to college or university. The illiteracy rate for females in Pakistan is rising, and their participation in higher education is increasing at a decreasing rate.[46] The patriarchal society has shown the place of the women at home only.

In Pakistan, around 25,000 individuals hold a doctoral degree, with a 9 percent share of women.[47] Married women largely wanted to pursue higher education, but the marital life requirements demotivate them to consider this step. In most cases, urban women with strong backgrounds tend to delay their marriages until they complete their degrees. Nevertheless, such decision making is not accessible to rural women. Marriage in rural parts of the country is taken as a marital asset where dowry and bride price is essential.[48] If a woman fails to bring it with her, she will be in trouble for the rest of her life. In such

[45] Haider, S. Z. (2008). Challenges in Higher Education: Special Reference to Pakistan and South Asian Developing Countries. *Nonpartisan Education Review*, 4(2).
[46] Siddique, M., Baig, M., & Munir, M. M. (2021). Female Education Supports In Up-Gradation Of A Society : An Investigation From Female Primary School Teachers In District Malir, Karachi. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2), 73–92.
[47] Munir, M.M., Munir, M. H., & Rubaca, U. (2021). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.
[48] Ashraf, E., Younis, M., & Shurgeel, H. K. (2015). A Review of Rural Women Education in Pakistan. *Science International*, 27(1).

circumstances, married women only preference becomes to safeguard their relationship, and their liking for education diminishes. On the other hand, husbands require women to perform home chores effectively, and any lapses will be subject to IPV.

The present study data analysis indicated similar patterns. The results showed that 28 percent (N = 43) of the married women wanted to pursue further education, but they could not do so due to lack of husband support and marital life pressures. Seventy-two percent of the women have shown Demotivation to participate in higher education because of the fears of divorce and IPV. One respondent with 31 years of age mentioned that "My husband is a doctor, and he is educated enough to understand me as well. But we live in a combined family system where my moth-in-law sometimes dislikes the support I get from my husband. Due to this pressure, my husband stopped me from going to university."

Another respondent aged 24 years from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province indicated that "I got married at the age of 15 years when I was attending school. My mother told me that this marriage is the price of settlement between two families. My husband was 38 years of age at the time of my marriage. I resisted the decision, but no one supported me. Now I am a mother of 3 kids and have become the victim of sexual and physical abuse every day. So education is out of the question for me."

Marital Life Challenges for Women in Higher Education

Gender inequalities have generated education inequity for women in Pakistan. Girls are trained for household works, and their success is embedded in a good housewife and an excellent mother. For this reason, married women receive no support from their husbands, family, or society to do an additional higher education task, particularly in rural parts of the country.[49] The disturbed political-economy dynamics have shaped the harsh attitudes of husbands towards women. The demographics and health survey (DHS) data publicized that 45 percent of women aged 15 to 49 years ever married experience IPV in Pakistan. The intensity of this violence has led men to kill women even on petty issues.

A recent study has reported that lack of 'taleem' (education), 'Aqal' (intelligence), 'Shaoor' (awareness), and 'tameez' (manners) are the root causes of men suspected of women.[50] Moreover, the unemployment accompanying financial problems is a significant risk factor for husbands' stresses.[51] Hence, ambitious women in higher education get restrictions. Families who witness IPV even in the neighbourhood limits their women. Married women in rural Pakistan have to undergo many clearances if they are offered higher education. Household conflicts between wives and in-laws are often exacerbated due to wives simultaneous attention towards home tasks and education. Husbands blame women for not taking care of the children or house due to more time in education. Delays in food preparations at home and suspicion of meeting other men at university are other

[49] Ashraf, E., Younis, M., & Shurgeel, H. K. (2015). A Review of Rural Women Education in Pakistan. *Science International*, 27(1).
[50] Bajwa, J., & Meerali, N. (2020). South Asian Albertan Men's Understandings of Spousal Violence. *Violence Against Women*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220945031.
[51] Hoodbhoy, P. (2006). Education in Pakistan-Challenges and Prospects. Center for Public Education.

admonitions on married women in higher education. Going out to university wearing inappropriate clothes are among those blames which gives substantial reason for husbands to perform IPV. Due to patriarchal norms, husbands justify these severe limitations on wives in higher education to correct them. This conservative perspective is supported by Islamic scriptures that legitimize husband perpetration of these limitations on wives.

The present study data analysis also indicated that only 11 respondents could pursue their higher education after marriage. However, three respondents left their education due to husbands performing IPV. Four respondents were forced to leave their husbands homes by in-laws and completed their education at their parents' house. Two respondents lost their mental peace due to the absence of family support, and day-to-day challenges eventually failed in final exams. The remaining two respondents were not able to complete their degrees due to pregnancy and health issues.

One respondent from the rural part of Punjab province narrated that "Life was never easy for me. Initially, my father forced me to get married at an early age as he considered me a burden. Then, my husband took me as a person who has dedicated her life to serving him in any way he wanted. My husband completely controlled my life. I was allowed to complete my education on one condition that this is the last wish of my life from my husband."

Discussion & Conclusion

Global efforts to eliminate the gender gap and devising strategies for promoting female education bid sustainable economic solutions. The developing countries somehow can achieve this milestone. However, developing countries like Pakistan are fronting challenges due to a lack of legislation on gender equality.[52] Recent statistics showed that Pakistan has 48.54 percent of females and 51.46 percent of the male population.[53] Sixty-two percent of the country's population resides in the rural part of the country. However, this large population in rural areas struggle with many facilities which are mostly available for the urban population. The capital investment of higher education lacks in rural outskirts; thus, rural part contribution in socio-economic factors is negligible.

According to Demeroutie et al. (2014), married women who employ selection procedure to meet their feelings of exhaustion, for instance, ignoring goal irrelevant activities and deciding on goal priorities, they are less adaptive towards change. Moreover, in consistent with the findings of Tims et al. (2013) study, the results of the present research indicated that the marital life has a significant impact on women's education and contributes heavily for a favorable output.

[52] Siddique, M., Baig, M., & Munir, M. M. (2021). Female Education Supports In Up-Gradation Of A Society : An Investigation From Female Primary School Teachers In District Malir, Karachi. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 21(2), 73–92.
[53] Munir, M.M., Munir, M. H., & Rubaca, U. (2021). The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.

The present study findings are also supported by the results of Fredrickson (2001) theory focused on married women marital issues and Hobfoll (2001) theory focused on married women pursuing higher education. The present study has identified that women marriages without their consent are a regular feature in Pakistani culture. In return, the voice of these rural women is not heard by legislative authorities. It raises the post-marriage problems for women, and their higher education participation becomes negligible. In their early married life, married women undergo psychological and health challenges, which creates more frustration within the family. The married women pursuing education at the time of marriage leave their education as family and home becomes their priority. In the absence of husband support, educated girls who wish to continue their education after marriage faces serious marital life challenges. Thus, these women prefer to safeguard their relationship over their dream of learning.

The study also identified that the percentage of such women who support their families after marriage is very low. Particularly, in rural parts, the married women don't get this support as the stigma of 'Log Kiya Kahein Gay' (What other people will perceive) prevails heavily. The decision making of a family is based on their societal norms, even it's harmful to them. Nobody dares to challenge the unfair practices, and consequently, supporting women for their education is nearly a forbidden act.

In Pakistan, 22.5 million children are out of school and girls are affected the most. The numbers indicated that 32 percent of girls and 21 percent are out of school at the primary school level, whereas 59 percent of girls and 49 percent of boys at grade six are out of school. This distance of percentage between boys and girls increases proportionate to the level of education.

Gender inequality and socio-economic challenges are based on the lack of women accessibility to higher education, particularly after their marriage in Pakistan.[54] For this reason, it was imperative to identify the key factors responsible for restricting married women to participate in higher education in Pakistan. In the backdrop of culturally and structurally patriarchal society, it was observed that social norms hinder married women from participating in higher education. An inadequately equipped health system, limited referral systems, and lack of knowledge coupled with little human capital investment enhance the married women vulnerability in higher education. Hence, the country suffers the highest rate of maternal mortality in Asia. Moreover, married women undergo various marital challenges, mainly acid attacks, honour killing, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Therefore, the desire of married women to participate in higher education shrinks.

Tribal Jirgas institutionalize Pakistan's rural culture. These Jirga's actions against the state laws and their decisions are significantly insensitive for women. Criminal law act 2016 was proposed to resist this tribal culture. However, rapes and honour killings are still on the rise. Women feel threatened to stand any inhumane act by their husband or in-laws and receive hurtful and filthy titles. Families assume that allowing married women for

[54] Mclendon, A.. An Analysis of the Self-Perceptions of Women Leaders in Higher Education. Doctoral Dissertation, (University of Florida, 2018).

education will neglect the house and family tasks. The success standard for a married woman is if her husband and in-laws are happy with her performance and behaviour. The whole life, married women, struggle to achieve satisfaction in their relationship. Therefore their priority of higher education becomes irrelevant to them.

Due to the decentralized government structure in Pakistan, every province proposes education policy with varying approaches, timelines, and levels of commitment for educating women. While government strives for offering affordable education to women in Pakistan at the school and college level, the tutoring is largely compromised with the less qualified and poorly paid teachers, lack of quality assurance, and idiosyncratic curricula. Hence, the disparity in the education system exists from one province to another. Moreover, social norms compelled parents and husbands to prohibit women from attending higher education. The fear of facing sexual harassment restricts husbands from allowing their women to attend college or university with the stigma of sons believed to be breadwinners of their families and daughters believed to be housewives or mothers design education investments accordingly. Due to this reason, child marriages (before age 15) are very common in Pakistan.

Recommendation

There is a dire need for strong legislation in the rural parts of the country to eliminate these tribal and societal practices preventing women from participating in higher education. Formulation of laws and their implementation in true letter and spirit is needed at the local level. Awareness and confidence are required for the women to feel protected and stand against such unfair acts. The voice of the women is necessary to be heard at all levels. For this, International Women's Day on 8th March every year is recognized to embrace gender parity.

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Annex A
Interview Guide:

01. Would you please explain whether your marriage was conducted with your permission and agreement?
    a. When was your marriage held?
    b. Your parents/family has asked you for the marriage?
    c. Do you think you had the choice not to marry?

02. Whether you were pursuing any education at the time of your marriage or what was your last qualification.
    a. What do you know about education?
    b. Are you interested and in favour of attaining education for women?
    c. When did you complete your last qualification?
    d. Are you currently pursuing any further educational qualifications?

03. Are you happy with your married life, and your husband and other family members are supportive?
    a. How is your marriage life? Do you think your marriage is a positive event or not?
    b. Do your husband, and his family listens to you?
    c. Do you think your husband and his family support your decisions?
    d. Do you consider your marriage an opportunity to grow, or is it affecting your life goals?

04. Do you want to pursue your further higher education or continue pursuing your further education after marriage?
    a. In your view, what is the importance of higher education for women in Pakistan?
    b. Do you support women's higher education?
    c. Do you want to pursue your higher/further education?
    d. After your last qualification, do you think you are being supported or will be supported by your husband and his family to pursue higher education?

05. What challenges or restrictions do you face to pursue higher education after marriage?
    a. Do you think there are any challenges for married women to pursue higher education?
    b. If you are pursuing or want to pursue higher education, what challenges may you face from your house or outside the home?

Do the restrictions and challenges hinder your motivation to complete your higher education, or are these negligible?